

[By Jessica Brady and Anna Palmer](#)

Rep. [Peter Welch](#) is coming out from behind the minority shadow, having claimed a little limelight on two pressing issues while also working with Republicans.

The three-term lawmaker's vocal presence is in stark contrast to Democratic leaders, who have largely struggled to gain traction under GOP rule. While they still navigate new positions in the minority, the Vermont Democrat has partnered with Republicans on a host of issues and succeeded in his push to have a floor vote on the debt limit.

On Tuesday, a "clean" bill to increase the debt limit without promising spending cuts made its way to the House floor for certain defeat. Although the bill was doomed from the start, Welch was pleased to have 97 Democrats vote in favor of a straightforward increase in the debt limit. And it came just days after the House considered his high-profile amendment to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan.

The back-to-back votes have given the mild-mannered lawmaker newfound media attention, but Welch maintains his rising status is not by design.

"There's no conscious plan here; my whole life in politics as a state legislator and in Congress has been about strengthening the middle class," he said in an interview.

Welch's efforts on the debt limit were strictly with Democrats, but he struck an unlikely partnership with conservative Rep. [Jason Chaffetz](#) on Afghanistan. Welch and the Utah Republican co-sponsored an amendment to withdraw troops from the country, which was defeated 123-294 on the floor last week during consideration of the defense authorization bill.

"To have that many votes indicates that there are a lot more out there," Welch said of the Afghanistan vote, which included 16 Republican supporters.

Chaffetz came to Welch's office in Longworth on Tuesday night for a tele-town hall with Vermont constituents. The two huddled over a speakerphone responding to questions from callers while staff munched on pizza and manned the lines. It was the first time the two hosted such an event, but in an interview Welch later said he's made a practice of dining with Members of the GOP.

"I've hosted Costco lasagna parties," he said, noting his last included five Democrats and five Republicans, including Chief Deputy Majority Whip [Peter Roskam](#) (Ill.). One Democratic lobbyist said Welch is positioning himself to become a close confidant of the next generation of elected leaders.

"I think he's lining himself up perfectly," the lobbyist said, noting that Welch does helpful things for Minority Whip [Steny Hoyer](#) (Md.) and Reps. [Joe Crowley](#) (N.Y.) and [Debbie Wasserman Schultz](#) (Fla.), who are all considered in prime spots to move up the leadership ladder whenever Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#) (Calif.) steps down.

Pelosi lauded Welch in a private Caucus meeting and on the floor before Tuesday's debt limit vote, even though she was one of 82 Democrats to vote against his position.

"In his letter, he is not demanding anything. He is saying, 'Let's get together and talk about how we can have, pass a bill that is a clean debt limit bill,'" she said on the floor.

Pelosi added: "Thank you, Mr. Welch, for your leadership in that regard. I know that it has been mischaracterized here, but I salute you for your leadership on that score."

With his letter demanding a clean debt limit vote, Welch rallied more than 110 of his Democratic colleagues to add their signatures to the idea of increasing the debt ceiling by \$2.4 trillion without spending cuts. Caucus Chairman [John Larson](#) (Conn.) was the only member of elected leadership to support Welch's effort, and the measure was defeated 97-318. Still, Welch corralled a majority of his Caucus behind the vote despite fears among colleagues of the

political ramifications.

"Those of us who voted are supportive of the president's efforts to negotiate a long-term solution, but not at any price," Welch said. "And we wanted to establish that we are willing to pay our bills, and we're not going to play political games on the debt ceiling."

While Tuesday's vote was a political exercise as part of the ongoing deficit reduction talks, one Democratic lawmaker pointed out it was also "an opportunity for Members to have something to vote for."

"It's their record of saying I voted for debt relief, I just didn't vote for cuts to Medicare," the lawmaker said, noting the vote provided political cover to those Members who will likely oppose any deal that calls for spending cuts.

Welch is not part of the bipartisan talks being led by Vice President Joseph Biden to craft a deal on the debt ceiling, nor is he the leadership's go-to Member on fiscal issues. But Rep. [David Price](#), who worked closely with Welch on the debt limit strategy, said the two believed it was important for Democrats to take a stand on raising the debt ceiling and that Welch helped lead the charge.

"He did a good job of articulating the rationale for both parties really to get away from this business of playing politics with the debt limit," the North Carolina Democrat said. "We have registered our view that this country pays its bills. We don't want to mess around with the full faith and credit of the United States."